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SUBJECT: OMAN'S ENVOY TO IRAN ADVISES POSTPONING U.S. DIALOG WITH
IRAN UNTIL AFTER IRANIAN ELECTIONS

REF: a) MUSCAT 58 (NOTAL), MUSCAT 04 (NOTAL)

CLASSIFIED BY: Gary A. Grappo, Ambassador; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

Summary

¶1. (C) Sultan Qaboos' Special Envoy to Iran and Advisor for Cultural Affairs, Abdul 'Aziz al Rowas, advises against U.S. dialog with Tehran until after the Iranian presidential elections. Speaking with the Ambassador January 27, Al Rowas suggested that proposing direct talks now would make the U.S. issue "even bigger" than it already is likely to become in the Iranian campaign. During his recent visit to Muscat (reftels), Iranian Vice President Rahim Moshaei told al Rowas that Iran wants affirmation of Iran's "dignity, pride and role in the world" from the U.S., and that Iran is "open for talks" with the new U.S. administration. End summary.

What Iran Wants

¶2. (C) Al Rowas met with Moshaei one-on-one (with interpreter) for more than an hour during his January 14-15 visit to Muscat, pressing him to explain "what you really want from the U.S." The Iranian launched into an emotion-laden screed against the U.S. and Zionism before al Rowas reportedly stopped him short declaring, "I'm not your gallery, I want the truth." After more familiar rhetoric, the Iranian divulged that it was U.S. affirmation of Iran's "pride, dignity and role in the world." In al-Rowas' estimation, Iran essentially seeks a reversal of the previous characterization of Iran as a member of the axis of evil.

¶3. (C) Al Rowas suggested that the President announce his commitment to fulfill his campaign pledge but make clear that the U.S. did not want to become a campaign issue in the upcoming presidential election in Iran and that the U.S. would be ready to initiate its dialog "with whomever the Iranian people choose" as their next president. Al Rowas added that the U.S. may wish to consider naming a special envoy for Iran, who could begin discussions with friends and allies. However, he cautioned, the U.S. may want to give careful consideration to the timing of that announcement.

¶4. (C) Postponing dialog would not only minimize the U.S. issue in the Iranian elections, argued the Omani, but also give the U.S. more time to "strengthen its hand." In particular, he asserted, the U.S. needs to concentrate on the Israeli-Palestinian track, progress on which would remove a currently powerful card from Iran's hand. "They (the Iranians) have been playing off of your inability to effectively address this critical issue within the Muslim world, weakening both you and Arab moderates; you need to neutralize them." In the Omani envoy's view, the Iranian position of "supporting the armed struggle" (i.e., against Israel) is very strong in the Muslim world at present. "They will use it against you when you sit across the table from them."

If Iran Isn't an Enemy, Then "Stop Behaving Like One"

¶5. (C) Al Rowas pressed Moshaei for a more clear and specific elucidation of Iranian demands of the U.S. but the Iranian deflected the probe. Instead, he argued that Iran did not wish to be an enemy of the U.S. and was open to dialog. Al-Rowas warned him that while Iran may not see a basis per se for enmity between the two countries, "you are not behaving as a friend or reliable member of the international community." Iran aligns itself with enemies not only of the U.S., al Rowas told the Iranian, but also of the international community, specifically citing Hezbollah, Hamas and even al-Qa'ida. Al Rowas said he also told Moshaei that if Iran wants an eventual meeting between its president and President Obama, then Iran's president will have to "fix his language." "The President of the U.S. isn't going to talk with someone who denies the holocaust and calls for the destruction of the state of Israel." The Iranian reportedly brushed off his president's infamous remarks as philosophical musings intended for domestic consumption.

¶6. (C) Al Rowas noted to the Ambassador that if Moshaei reflects the thinking of more senior Iranians, which he believes he does, the Iranians may be looking for a way to approach and reach an accommodation with the U.S. that "saves face." Everyone in Iran is afraid of either failing to get appropriate concessions from the U.S. or appearing to give in to the Americans, volunteered the Omani. "So, you (the U.S.) will need to look for face-saving measures for them."

Ahmadinejad Will Run and Win in June

¶7. (S/NF) Mahmood Ahmadinejad will run in the June presidential elections and win. According to the Omani envoy, Ahmadinejad has a strong political organization at both the national and local levels and is able to connect with the average Iranian, despite the country's current economic woes. He dismissed the possible candidacy of former president Khatemi, arguing that Khatemi as a cleric and scholar lacked the necessary campaign political skills to deal with the "street-fighter" Ahmadinejad. In addition, he commented that Khatemi had alienated Iranian women as president and, therefore, would have a difficult time attracting women

voters. "I know Khatemi very well and speak with him often, but I would be very sorry to see him run; Ahmadinejad fights very differently and would humiliate Khatemi."

Comment

18. (C) Al Rowas, who has served as special envoy of the Sultan to Iran since the revolution, appeared positive about prospects for what he termed "dC)tente" between the U.S. and Iran. He often interrupted himself to point out how difficult dealing and negotiating with the Iranians can be -- "they push you beyond the point of frustration and then keep pushing" -- and underscored the importance not only of waiting until after the elections but also of strengthening our negotiating position, which he currently sees as weak, before we begin a dialog. Finally, he was clear that he and Oman are willing to assist us. End Comment.

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17. (S/NF) While avoiding specific mention or criticism of Israel,

the Sultan made clear in his language and tone palpable disappointment and sadness over Israeli actions and the disproportionate loss of life and destruction of property in Gaza. The Sultan also stressed the imperative of Palestinian political factions coming together. Until that happens, he observed, they were unlikely to reach any agreement with Israel on a future Palestine. He indicated that some Arab governments, including Egypt and Saudi Arabia, would be giving renewed attention to this matter in the coming weeks.

Qatar: Leader of the Spoilers

18. (S/NF) The Sultan expressed considerable disappointment with the unhelpful role of Qatar during the crisis. Qatar had sought to

undermine primarily Egypt, but also Saudi Arabia, throughout the crisis with the ultimate objective of weakening Egypt's standing in

the Arab world and to take on a greater role for itself. While he professed "excellent relations" with Emir Hamad of Qatar, the Sultan did not disguise his disappointment with Qatar's actions. He added that the Qataris were aided in their efforts by both Syria

and Algeria, but he discounted "direct" involvement by Iran and Qatar-Iranian "plotting" during the crisis. In the case of Syria, he said that Damascus would always seek to diminish Cairo's status within the Arab League, not only for its top standing but also for signing a peace agreement with Israel. In the case of Algeria, however, he indicated that the government genuinely feared violent demonstrations in the streets that could get out of control and, therefore, needed "to get ahead of its street" in the only way available to it.

19. (S/NF) On Qatar, the Sultan explained that Sheikh Hamad held a

grudge against Egypt for allegedly trying to return his father to the Qatari throne following his ouster in the mid-nineties. The Sultan thought it unlikely that this had actually occurred; nevertheless, the suspicion was evident. Moreover, postulated the Sultan, the Qataris believe that Hosni Mubarak "has very little time left" and upon his departure, the Muslim Brotherhood will step

in. Qatar wishes to align itself now with the next likely power-maker in Egypt. Again, the Sultan expressed his disagreement

with the Qataris' contention. However, he argued that Doha has very skillfully used Al Jazeera, "Qatar's army," to attack Egypt and Saudi Arabia and has effectively succeeded in diminishing the stature of both throughout the Arab world and concomitantly raising

that of Qatar. Qaboos expressed grudging admiration for Qatar's use of Al Jazeera; "they've been brilliant in using Al Jazeera as a

weapon against Egypt and Saudi Arabia and a very effective tool for

their own policies."

Gulf Soccer War?

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110. (S/NF) The Sultan expressed great relief at the just concluded Gulf Cup soccer competition, which was won by Oman for the first time in 19 tournaments. There had been considerable concern among Oman's police of clashes between Omani and UAE fans after the Emiratis' alleged treatment of the Oman team and fans during the last Cup competition held two years ago in Abu Dhabi. (Comment: In the Cup final between Oman and the UAE in 2007, Omanis accused the Emiratis of shining hand lasers in the eyes of the Omani players, excluding Omanis fans from the match, and vandalizing vehicles of Omani partisans. End comment.) There were

indeed several clashes between Omanis and Emiratis during this competition but thankfully, the Sultan said, because Oman and the UAE were in separate groups and did not play one another, the risk

of a major confrontation was minimized.

¶11. (S/NF) Tensions were further exacerbated when Oman awarded the television contract for the Cup to Al Jazeera, which reportedly

not only presented the highest bid but also offered to train Omani TV and broadcast technicians and leave behind their equipment to Oman Television and to allow Oman TV to simultaneously broadcast all Oman games free of charge. Al Jazeera outbid competing offers from both Dubai and Abu Dhabi, and some media in the UAE had publicly accused the Omanis of accepting bribes from Al Jazeera. The Sultan commended Dubai Ruler Mohammed bin Rashid for stepping in and quelling the recrimination before it escalated, and reaffirmed the otherwise strong relationship between the Omani and UAE governments but allowed that "our people have some differences."

Last Summer's Row over TIP: "It's Behind Us"

¶12. (S/NF) I provided the Sultan a brief overview of general U.S.

policy on trafficking and our assessment of the overarching problem

in Gulf countries, including in Oman, and underscored our desire to

work cooperatively with Omani authorities to address TIP problems in Oman. I emphasized our wish to avoid a repeat of what occurred in 2008 but indicated that would mean Oman continuing to move forward as outlined in the recently passed anti-TIP law. The Sultan laconically remarked "the incident is behind us" and then began a brief discourse on his commitment and responsibility to "protect all who live in this country from injustice."

Kudos on the FTA Implementation

¶13. (C) I offered my congratulations to him on the January 1 implementation of our FTA and thanked him for his support of the agreement and his direct intervention to resolve problems in IPR and telecommunications. He offered his own thanks to the USG and to the embassy and said he was greatly relieved after more than two

years of effort to complete the necessary and difficult work necessary for implementation. The Sultan has issued instructions to the Ministry of Commerce & Industry to begin educating Omani businesses to take advantage of the FTA

Qaboos Philosophy

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¶14. (S/NF) As is his habit, the Sultan often begins conversations

with a discussion of whatever may be on his mind at the time or a political matter of the day. In addition, when discussing a specific subject he frequently digresses if there is an especially relevant historical or religious point to be made. These are summarized below in particular order.

-- Science and Islam: Those who sit in a mosque all day and recite

prayers are not worshipping, he argued. Worshipping God, according

to Islam, means "using the gifts given us by God to discover His plan for the universe." The Muslim world at one time led the entire world in science, but 500 years ago, Muslims decided it was better to just pray. "Since then we've contributed very little to science, literature or the arts." (Comment: The Sultan is an avid

amateur astronomer, organic farmer and classical organist. End comment.)

-- Marriage and Women in Islam: Always ready to criticize Wahabis,

Sultan Qaboos vigorously attacked the recent "fatwa" of a Saudi cleric allowing the marriage of girls as young as ten. "Do they think women are animals for breeding?" he asked rhetorically, and again cited Muslim "intellectual laziness" for failure to understand the Quran and its relevance to the modern world. He also referred to Saudi restrictions on a woman's ability to travel alone. "It's some of their men who need escorts, not their women!"

In Oman, women enjoy the same rights to travel as men.

-- Sexual Behavior: "Relations between two adults are no one's business, least of all the government's." He said he would not permit his government to interfere in the relationship of two adults unless it became abusive or threatened to upset "social stability." (Comment: The latter is codeword for Oman's arcane and still largely tribal society. This is the only instance I have

heard him raise what is customarily considered a taboo subject in

conservative Oman. End comment.)

-- Freedom: "I want all Omanis to enjoy full freedom -- personal, religious, economic and social." But in this part of the world, there are always a few who want such freedoms but are unwilling to accept the responsibility that comes with freedom.

Comment

115. (S/NF) The Sultan appeared healthy, in good spirits and somewhat more animated than in some of our previous meetings. He was quick to raise the matter of the then impending inauguration and his concerns about Pakistan. Both he and his Special Advisor for External Affairs, Dr. Omar Zawawi, followed the U.S. presidential campaign closely. The latter told me that he had purchased both of the President's books and recommended to the Sultan that he read them. Dr. Zawawi read both.

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